



A working river is reborn

The birthplace of America's industrial revolution is now a playground

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First in a series



Journal photo / Steve Szydlowski
A group of about 20 canoeists travel the Blackstone River after leaving River Bend Farm in Uxbridge, Mass., on June 16. The group, headed by Massachusetts state Rep. George N. Peterson Jr., took a three-day tour.

Through the centuries, the Blackstone River has lived different lives.

In the 1700s, William Blackstone found it a place of "undisturbed solitude," where he could dwell with his orchards and books.

In the 1800s, it became the "hardest-working river in America," its banks crowded with mills as Samuel Slater and dozens of others -- drawn by the Blackstone's 400-foot drop from Worcester, Mass., to Providence -- used its water to turn the looms that wove the cloth that made them rich.

By the 1900s, the Blackstone had tired. Its mills were closing up or burning down. Its banks were strewn with trash, and the silt beneath its waters was polluted by two centuries of industrial use. It was being written off as beyond redemption.

Today, the waterway is in a sort of working retirement. The river that once powered factories is taking it easy as a playground for bikers, hikers and canoeists.

Many of its mills are gone. Their places have been taken -- literally -- by boat landings, such as the one in the Manville section of Lincoln, or the dock at Central Falls Landing;

or small parks, such as the Valley Falls Heritage Park, in Cumberland, and River Island Park, in Woonsocket; or the Blackstone River Bikeway.

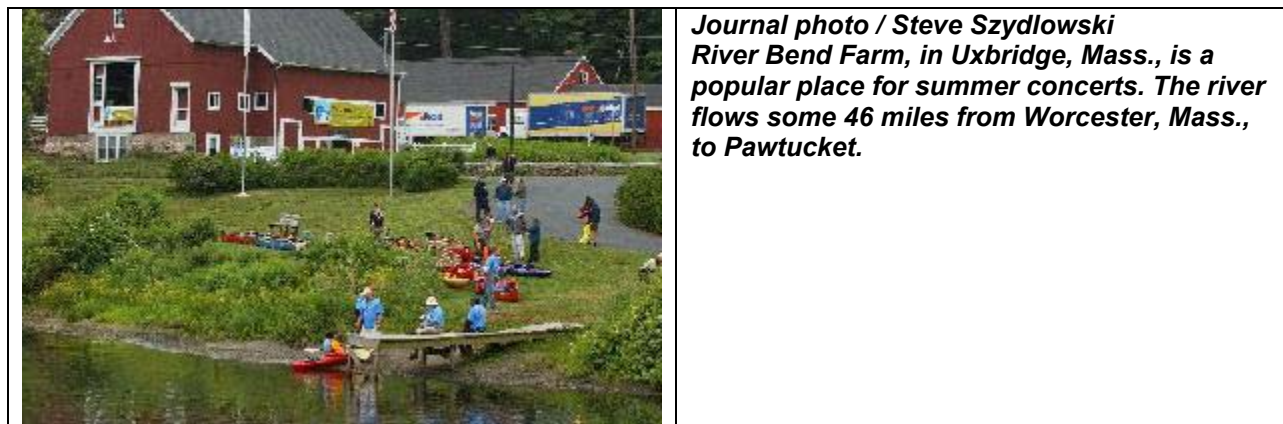
Twenty years ago, Slater Mill, in Pawtucket -- the first water-powered textile mill, celebrated as the birthplace of the American industrial revolution -- was pretty much the centerpiece of the valley's tourism identity. Robert Billington, president and founder of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council, said that has changed.

Now, there are visitor centers in Pawtucket, Woonsocket, and Uxbridge, Mass., and another is planned for Worcester. Restored houses along Great Road, in Lincoln, host regular events. Up and down the river, organizations, private groups and businesses offer concerts and shows -- such as this month's RiverSing -- that use the river as a backdrop.

Boat tours and tea cruises are offered throughout the year. National Park Service rangers conduct walking tours of historic locales. There are bird-watching tours and, in September, a paddling-biking-running triathlon that will race through the valley from Grafton, Mass., to Lincoln.

And Slater Mill still draws visitors.

"Not everything has to be a museum here," said Billington.



The main coordinators of the transformation have been the tourism council and the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission. The tourism council was created in 1984, when a group of business owners banded together to promote themselves and their region.

In 1986, the federal government joined in, by establishing the corridor commission. It's a federally financed consortium of 24 cities and towns in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, run by a board of directors drawn from those communities.

It owns no land, nor does it manage any. It gets money from the federal government -- about \$1.8 million this year -- that it dispenses as grants to groups, or as planning assistance to municipalities. It subsidizes efforts ranging from a town's study of how to devise riverfront zoning to a theater group's buying and rehabilitating an old building for performances.

The corridor commission has been seeding programs in Massachusetts and Rhode Island since 1986. Massachusetts officials -- who visit Rhode Island and see boat landings and bikeways that are lacking in their state -- say they have to do a better job of providing that kind of access to the river and through the corridor.

Earlier this month, Massachusetts state Rep. George N. Peterson Jr., a Republican from Grafton, took a three-day canoe and bike trip down the river, organized by the corridor commission.

His party of about 20 pulled up on the landing in Cumberland, across the river from Manville. The site was a simple quarter-acre of grassed land, but Peterson was impressed.

He recalled the Massachusetts portion of the trip, where he and the others had to step around poison ivy and through freshly hacked branches to get to the river. Boarding the canoe was often a delicate operation there, requiring them to step gingerly along jagged rocks embedded in steep and muddy banks.

Peterson said few riverside sites are open to the public in his state, unlike in Rhode Island, where the state and municipalities have set aside pieces of land to provide access to the river.

"Here, you've pretty much worked it out," he said. "In Massachusetts, we went through the woods and briar patches to get at [the river]."



***Journal photo / Steve Szydlowski
The Blackstone River rushes under the
Hartford Avenue bridge in Uxbridge.***

Corridor commission officials say the little things, such as the landing by Manville, will add up over the years, creating secondary effects on the local economy.

Billington pointed to two large real-estate developments as evidence of that.

In Pawtucket, Riverfront Lofts has already started selling units in the old Lebanon Mill, on the river. When the project was unveiled last year, prices were starting at \$150,000, with some posher units offered for as much as \$500,000. The developers touted the units as having water views of the "historic Blackstone River."

Upriver in Woonsocket, the same thing may be happening. Bernon Mills Estates, a collection of three stone mill buildings, is slated to be converted into 48 condominium units. The developers have said that Phase One calls for a batch of 16 units starting at about \$250,000, with larger ones going for up to \$500,000. They, too, tout a view of the Blackstone as one of the reasons for buying.

Another mixed-use development, still in the preliminary stages, is being proposed for the quarry site in Cumberland, across the river from Manville.

As in the 1800s, when Samuel Slater's mill set off a chain reaction that transformed the state and the country, Billington said he hopes multimillion-dollar projects such as Riverfront Lofts and Bernon Mills will be just the first ripples of the economic effects that two decades of improving the Blackstone will produce.

"We've been priming this pump for 20 years," he noted.

Events along the Blackstone River in the week ahead

FRIDAY

Noon. Millbury Lawn Concert Series, Main and Elm streets, Millbury, Mass.

1 to 2:30 p.m. Fridays Timeline Trekkers, Blackstone River & Canal Heritage State Park, at River Bend Farm Visitor Center, 287 Oak St., Uxbridge, Mass. Children ages 5 to 10 learn about local wildlife and history, through arts, crafts and exploration. Call (508) 278-7604 to register.

2 to 5 p.m. Neighborhood Nature on the Water, at Green Hill Park, Broad Meadow Brook Wildlife Sanctuary, 414 Massasoit Ave., Worcester. Canoe fun, Fridays through July; swimming skills are required. Call (508) 753-0687.

SATURDAY

7 to 9:30 a.m. Saturday Morning Bird Walk for Adults, Broad Meadow Brook Wildlife Sanctuary, 414 Massasoit Ave., Worcester. Free for members; \$5 for others. Register at (508) 753-6087.

9 a.m. Family Bird Banding, Blackstone River & Canal Heritage State Park, Oak Street, Uxbridge, Mass. Call (508) 278-7604.

1 to 4 p.m. Historic Great Road Open House, a monthly open house that allows visitors to "travel 300 years in three miles," sponsored by Friends of Hearthside, at sites along Great Road, in Lincoln. Call (401) 726-0598. No charge for tours and demonstrations; donations are encouraged. Log on to www.blackstonevalley.org to download a self-guided tour map.

SUNDAY

1 to 4 p.m. Blackstone Valley Explorer Wilderness Tour: Cruise the river aboard a 49-passenger tour boat. Public tours leave from Central Falls Landing, Broad Street at Madeira Avenue, at 1, 2, 3, 4 p.m. \$7 for adults, \$6 for seniors and children. Call (401) 724-2200.

1 and 3 p.m. Samuel Slater Canal Boat, British Tea Tours. All seats \$17.50. Reservations required. Call (401) 724-2200.

3:30 p.m. Sunday Concerts on the Canal, at the River Bend Farm Visitor Center, Blackstone River & Canal Heritage State Park, Oak Street, Uxbridge, Mass.

5 to 6 p.m. Sunday Concerts on the Common, Slatersville Common, Route 102, North Smithfield.

6:30 p.m. Pawtucket Riverfront Concert Series, Veterans Memorial Amphitheatre, Roosevelt Avenue and Exchange Street, Pawtucket.

MONDAY -- INDEPENDENCE DAY

11 a.m. Arnolds Mills Fourth of July Parade, Nate Whipple Highway (Route 120), Cumberland.

1 p.m. Arnolds Mills Fourth of July Concert, Village Green, Nate Whipple Highway (Route 120), Cumberland.

SOURCE: Blackstone Valley Tourism Council's Web site, www.tourblackstone.com

Online at: http://www.projo.com/news/content/projo_20050627_river27.2283b8e.html